



# Prairie Pages

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Education Services

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

## Stephen A. Douglas

### Glossary

**compromise** - a way to settle a disagreement with both sides getting some things but not everything; a give and take settlement

Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois was one of America's most famous politicians in the 1850's. In the years before the Civil War (1861-1865) Americans did not agree about slavery. Some people thought it was an evil thing, while others thought that it was necessary to their way of life. There were three ways people thought the United State's government could deal with the issue. The Federal government could end slavery all over the country, or allow it to continue and expand into new territories and states, or let the existing slaves states keep slavery, but not let it spread any farther. Douglas, a United States senator from 1847-1861, thought that *voters* in the new territories should decide whether or not to allow slavery. What he offered was a **compromise**. People continued to argue and sometimes fight over the difficult problems of slavery and the right of each state to decide the slavery question. Douglas ran for President as a Democrat in 1860 because he thought he could help the country out of this terrible situation.

Stephen Douglas had come a long way from his birthplace in Brandon, Vermont where he was born on April 23, 1813. As soon as he was old enough, Douglas, like many other young men living in the eastern part of America, moved west looking for a better life. He arrived in Quincy, Illinois in 1833. He was only twenty years old. He had no job, no money, and no friends in Illinois, but he still believed



Stephen Douglas,  
Courtesy Abraham  
Lincoln Presiden-  
tial Library.

**plantation** - a very large farm

he would be a success. He got a job teaching school and studied with borrowed books during his free time. He earned his law license and opened an office in Jacksonville.

Douglas loved politics and became a strong supporter of the Democratic Party in Illinois. Because he was a first-class speaker and had an unusual appearance, he was someone people remembered. He was given the nickname the *Little Giant* because he was very short, with a barrel shaped chest and a large head. He was small, but he had big ideas and the energy to reach his goals. The Democratic Party rewarded his hard work and excellent political skills with various state government jobs. In 1843, he was elected to the the U.S. Congress.

In Washington D.C., the young politician met Martha Martin and they were married. She was from a very wealthy family in North Carolina. Her family owned a large **plantation** and for a wedding present gave the couple their own 2,500 acre plantation and 100 slaves. Douglas was shocked and did not

accept the gift. Instead Martha's father left the property and slaves to his daughter in his will. Instead of living on a plantation, the young couple moved to Chicago to make their new home. Douglas bought property in Chicago. The city was growing quickly and he became rich selling the land. The family grew to include two sons, Robert Martin Douglas and Stephen Arnold Douglas, Jr. Life was good for Douglas, his wife, and sons until Martha died giving birth to a baby girl. After his wife's death and the death of his baby daughter a few weeks later, Douglas was very upset and extremely depressed. He traveled for ten months to various places all over the world. He returned to Washington and to a nation with growing problems. Luckily for Stephen Douglas, a few years later, he met and married a beautiful young woman, Adele Cutts Douglas.

Douglas believed strongly that the country should develop the western

Adele Cutts Douglas,  
Courtesy Abraham  
Lincoln Presidential  
Library.



Adele Cutts Douglas

**debate** - a discussion with each side presenting opinions and support for their ideas

**popular sovereignty** - a way for the settlers in each territory to vote before becoming a state as to whether that state would or would not allow slavery.

territories. He used his power in the Senate to help the Illinois & Central Railroad because he thought this rail line would help Illinois. He wanted the railroad to start in Chicago and extend all the way to Mobile, Alabama on the Gulf of Mexico. To get the funding for this project Douglas made a deal with the Senators from Mississippi. The line was successfully completed and is still in operation today. Millions of dollars in profit have come to Illinois because of Senator Douglas' efforts to get this railroad built. He also supported the construction of a railroad that would extend to the Pacific Ocean and he wanted it to take a northern route through Illinois. He knew that this would help the state become the crossroads of the nation. This project was not completed until after the Civil War.

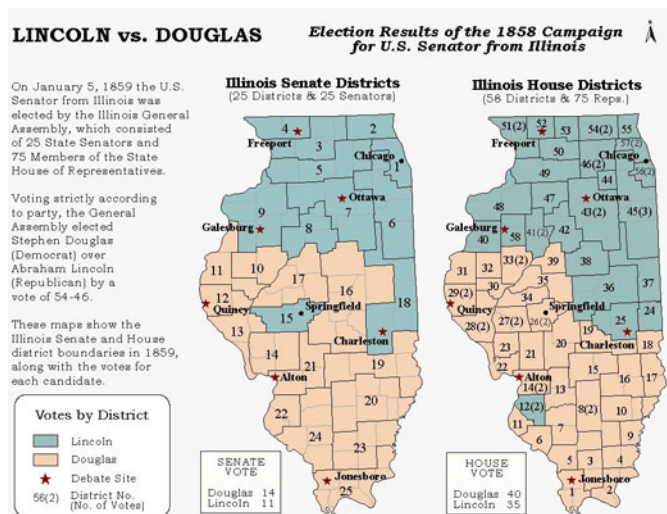
While Senator Douglas worked to promote projects that were good for Illinois, he also worked very hard to keep both sides of the slavery issue talking and working toward a solution for the problem. During the first half of the 1800s, America was getting bigger as territories in the west were granted statehood. The big question each time a state was added was whether it

would be a free state or a slave state. A few people, like Senator Douglas, wanted to find a compromise. People were deeply divided over slavery. Some thought it was wrong while others saw it as right and necessary.

In 1858, Douglas faced Abraham Lincoln as his opponent in the race for U.S. Senator from Illinois. The two candidates **debated** the issue of slavery in seven different Illinois cities. People paid attention to the Lincoln-Douglas debates because both men were respected for their opinions and political ideas. Douglas stood for **popular sovereignty** while Lincoln argued that America could not survive half slave

and half free states. Although Douglas won the election, the debates let Abraham Lincoln tell to the whole country his views on the important issues facing the nation.

Once again, in the presidential election of 1860, Douglas ran as the Democratic candidate against Lincoln. Because of the



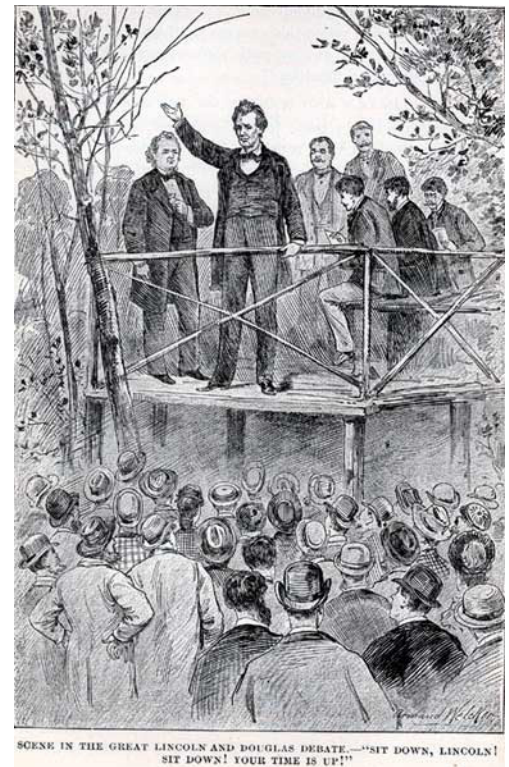
Election results in the 1858 election for United States Senate. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Digitization Project, Northern Illinois University Libraries, <<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu>>.



**secessionist** - a person who agrees that states have the right to break away from the country and form a new country

attention Lincoln received during their earlier debates, the Republican Party had named him as their candidate. This time Douglas lost the election to Lincoln. Even after losing the chance to be President, he still tried to bring the North and South together. He failed. The Civil War began when the states in the South seceded from the Union over states' rights and the slavery issue. Douglas cared deeply about the nation and supported President Lincoln and the Union against the **secessionist** states. The country lost a devoted servant when Senator Douglas fell ill and died in Chicago on June 3, 1861.

Lincoln Douglas Debates, Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Digitization Project, Northern Illinois University Libraries, <<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu>>.



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